Conference looks at indicators to assess health of Great Lakes ecosystem

By Ann McCammon Soltis, GLIFWC Policy Analyst

Hamilton, Ont.—The fourth biennial State of the Lakes Ecosystem Conference (SOLEC) was held on October 17-19 in Hamilton, Ontario. The focus of SOLEC 2000 was "Implementing Indicators."

A suite of indicators was proposed and debated at SOLEC 98; this was the first opportunity for participants to report on what the indicators are telling us about the state of the Great Lakes.

SOLEC participants reported on 31 indicators covering a wide spectrum of the ecosystem, from forest fragmentation, to fish contaminants, to non-native species. The indicators covered three different scales—the basin-wide scale, the individual lake scale and the local scale. A document describing each of the indicators is available, by contacting Ann McCammon Soltis at the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC).

Five presentations during the second day of the conference highlighted actions on the local scale. One of those presentations was given by GLIFWC Wildlife Biologist Peter David. David addressed about 500 conference participants in a speech describing the importance of manoomin (wild rice) to GLIFWC's member tribes, GLIFWC's wild rice program, and the potential of wild rice as an environmental indicator.

"The speech seemed to be very well received," noted GLIFWC Biological Services Director Neil Kmiecik, "and it looks like there is an interest in further evaluating whether wild rice would be a good indicator of ecosystem and wetland health. Whether or not wild rice is added to the indicator list, it will remain an important part of GLIFWC's resource management program."

In the afternoon, approximately 25 people attended a breakout session intended to provide a more in-depth look at wild rice. David described GLIFWC's work on wild rice and provided additional detail for interested individuals.

"Participants in the breakout session were interested in a variety of issues," says David. "These include reestablishing wild rice in other parts of the Great Lakes basin, the conditions under which rice seeding is most likely to be successful, and identifying research needs."

Also during SOLEC 2000, GLIFWC Administration for Native Americans Program Director Jim St. Arnold addressed a crowded breakout session on Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK), also known as Naturalized Knowledge Systems. Three speakers discussed how specific ecological projects and programs have used TEK.

The EAGLE project, which looks at the effects of environmental contamination on native communities in the eastern Great Lakes, blends western science with TEK in order to achieve a holistic approach to health.

A project at Walpole Island used TEK to identify the locations of traditional hunting and gathering areas. Finally, St. Arnold spoke about the use of TEK in GLIFWC's work and in the court cases that reestablished treaty reserved rights in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

The session on TEK was very well attended, indicating a sincere interest by SOLEC organizers in exploring ways to incorporate TEK into the SOLEC indicator process.